



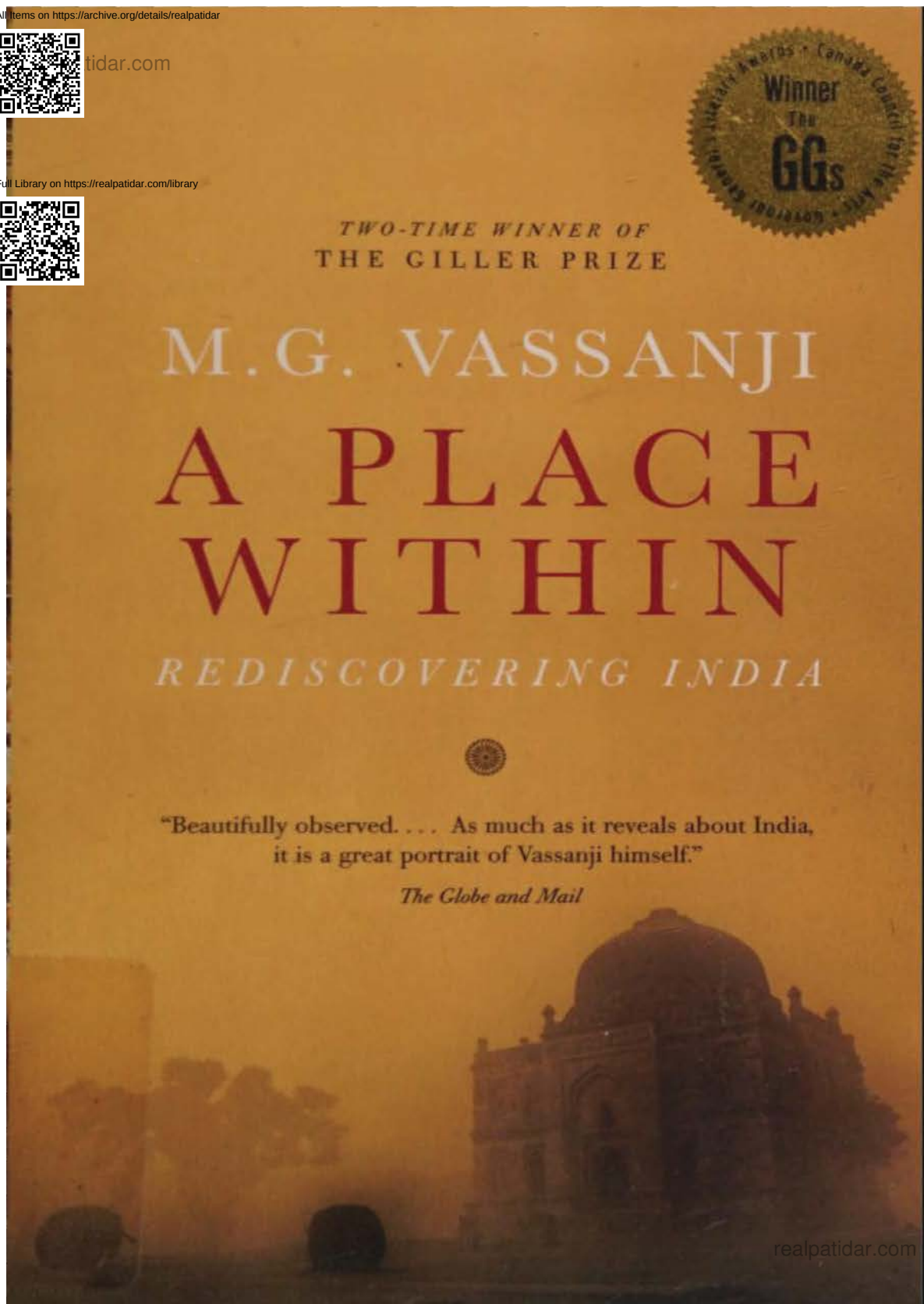
2009 - A Place Within -Rediscovering India -Relevant Pages (1340)

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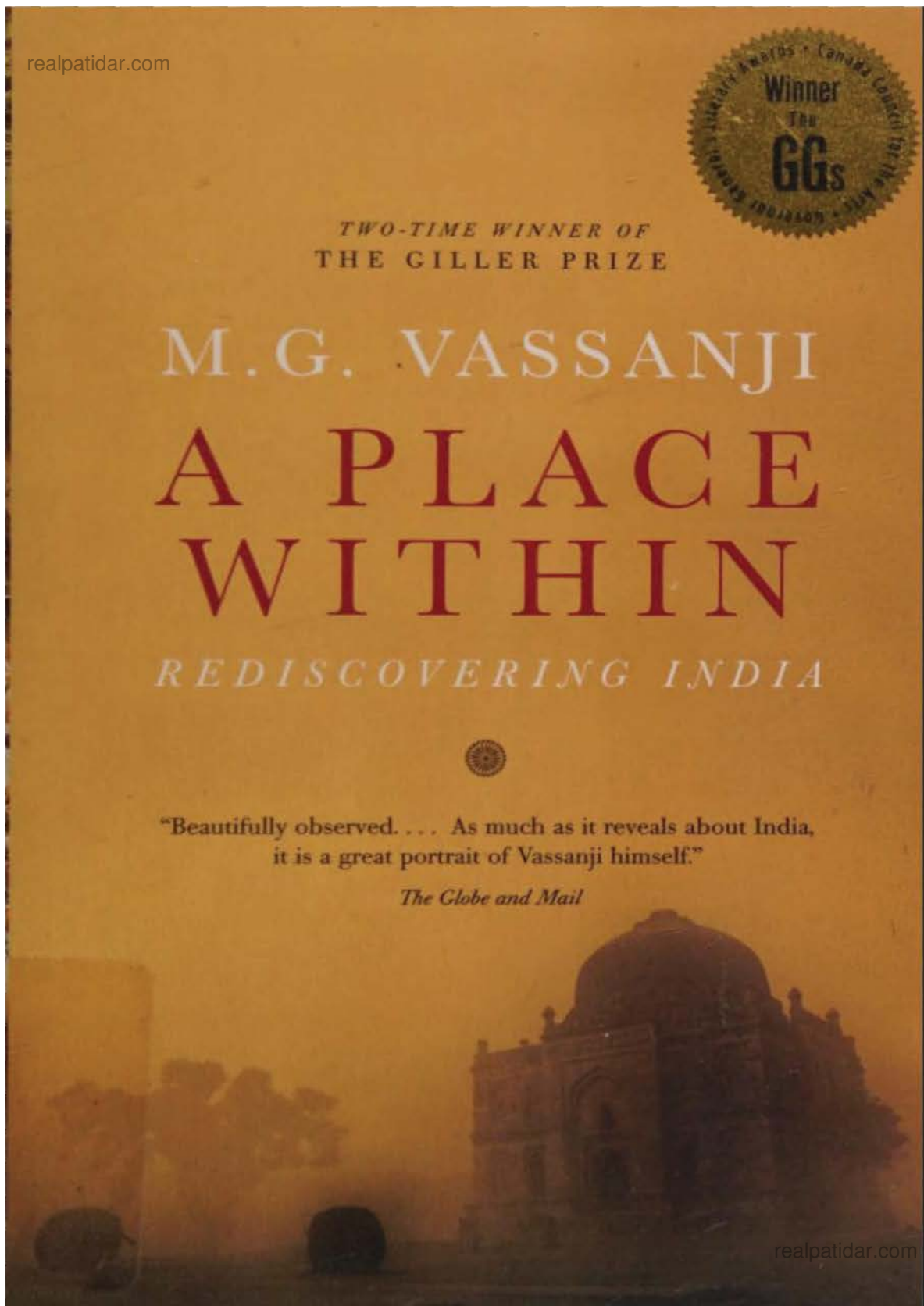
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2009 -A Place Within -Rediscovering India -Relevant Pages (1340)

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M. G. Vassanji



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A PLACE WITHIN

Rediscovering India

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Introduction

IT WOULD TAKE MANY LIFETIMES, it was said to me during my first visit, to see all of India. It was January 1993. The desperation must have shown on my face to take in all I possibly could. This was not something I had articulated or resolved, and yet I recall an anxiety as I travelled the length and breadth of the country, senses raw to every new experience, that even in the distraction of a blink I might miss something profoundly significant.

I was **not born in India, nor were my parents**; that might explain much in my expectation of that visit. Yet how many people go to the birthplace of their grandparents with such a heartload of expectation and momentousness, such a desire to find themselves in everything they see? Is it only India that clings thus, to those who've forsaken it; is this why Indians in a foreign land seem always so desperate to seek each other out?

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What was India to me? I must put this in the past, because by now I have returned many times and my relationship to the country has evolved. Ever since that first visit, there has been the irrepressible urge to describe my experience of India; yet in spite of copious notes this was not easy, because that experience was deeply subjective, my India was essentially my own creation, what

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x I put of myself in it. I grew up in Dar es Salaam, on the coast of
— East Africa; the memory and sight of that city, of that continent,
evoke in me a deep nostalgia and love of place. India, on the
other hand, seemed to do something to the soul; give it a certain
ease, a sense of homecoming, quite another kind of nostalgia.
During each visit I sought it more, as intensely as ever. There was
no satisfaction.

I recall my maternal grandmother relating how one day as a
child back in Gujarat in India she was lost, having gone out with
her sister to bring home water. I also recall not paying any partic-
ular attention to this story set in a foreign land as it was being told
to my elder siblings, who sat on the floor around her. But I seem
to have paid more attention than I thought I did, for I always car-
ried a picture of two Indian girls sitting under a tree in an open
land, waiting to be rescued. And that was all there was to the story:
getting lost and rescued somewhere in India.

The East African countries became independent from Britain in
the early 1960s. But by then to my generation and in my commu-
nity of people, our spiritual home, so we naively thought, was
already England. We believed we could shed our ancestral con-
nections for a thin veneer of colonialness, an ersatz sophistication.
And so we chose to imagine India as poor, backward, and
laughable—the past. It seems evident now that all that laughing
and jeering was at ourselves, our colonial, racial insecurity; we
were both the clown and its audience. It did not take long to be
disillusioned.

There were always stories about India. One of them concerned
my orphaned father, who apparently was something of a wanderer
as a young man. All his travels were within the territory of East
Africa, but once, according to my mother, he took it upon himself
to board a ship bound from Mombasa to Bombay, without papers
or much money. When he reached the great city, he was not
allowed to disembark. He returned disappointed. I always imagine

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him watching Bombay wistfully through the portholes of that ship, until it finally turned around and crossed the Indian Ocean back to Africa. Another Bombay story, and repeated more often for its comic value, involved one of my uncles, my mother's older brother, so excessively pious as to be considered nicely crazy. Apparently he reached Bombay and disembarked, but upon seeing the extreme poverty in evidence, he returned home on the same ship. I would picture him seated in misery atop his luggage outside the harbour, having given all his money to the swarm of beggars that had plagued him.

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My mother held blithely contradictory views about India. On one hand it was the land of ruthless cunning and violence—which she could illustrate with colourful and often morbid tales heard from passersby in our shop. On the other hand, India was the land of primal morality—which was why she would allow us to go to the cinema, sometimes, to watch a tearful Bollywood social drama offering lessons in fortitude, piety, and family values, and songs to remember afterwards. In a grand gesture for our meagre means, she sent us all to the Odeon to watch the blockbuster *Mother India*: a widow brings up her two sons against much hardship, and triumphs at the end. My mother too was a widow, which was also why I could never hear firsthand the full story of my dad's fruitless trip to Bombay. *Mother India* was perhaps the only film she herself saw in a decade.

There was, finally, the ancestral mythical memory of India. According to a founding legend of my people, the **Gujarati Khojas**, a Muslim holy man arrives in medieval times at a remote village in western Gujarat and joins the people in a **traditional dance called the garba**. As he dances, he sings them a song. The villagers and the mystic—for such he is—go around in circles, clapping hands in rhythm and singing. The people are poor and desperate, for the land is prone to drought; the visitor is new and charismatic and hopeful. They are Krishna devotees, whom he teaches to expect

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an incarnation of the god to come from the west. You should sing day and night, he sings to them—meaning, I am not sure what, but perhaps this was how they should express their new expectation and joy. Meanwhile they continued worshipping their beloved Krishna. These spiritual dance songs are called the garbi and belong to a larger corpus called ginans.

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That syncretism, a happy combination of mystical and devotional Hinduism and Islam, without a thought to internal contradictions or to the mainstream traditions, inevitably defined my relationship with India. The existence of such inclusive systems of belief was proof of an essential historical quality of India, that of tolerance and flexibility, a certain laissez faire in matters of the spirit, at least at the local level, far away from the watchful eyes of orthodoxy. Therefore today I can only find the labels “Hindu” and “Muslim” too exacting, too excluding; I resist them. They carry the charge of recent history and a consequent bitterness, to which I refuse to subscribe. In my travels in India I would simply let people assume “what” I was, since according to them I had to be something. My two initials were my mask.

“What is this India?” asks Jawaharlal Nehru, in his book *The Discovery of India*, in a chapter titled, significantly, “The Quest.” For Nehru, India was a discovery, a reclamation. “What is this India, apart from her physical and geographical aspects? . . . India was in my blood and there was much in her that instinctively thrilled me. And yet I approached her almost as an alien critic . . .”

My first serious engagement with India began when as a student strolling along the aisles of a university book sale one spring in Cambridge, Massachusetts, I happened upon a remaindered copy of Jawaharlal Nehru’s autobiography and quickly—though I cannot say with what expectation—picked it up. Something of the liberal expansiveness of the author, educated in Harrow and that other Cambridge, in England, and his generosity of spirit, appealed to

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this expatriate student barely out of his teens and foundering upon questions of identity on alien shores. I was of Indian descent, born in East Africa, had recently seen the independence of my country, amidst great euphoria and hope for Africa. Nehru wrote his autobiography (as he did his *Discovery*) during one of his several terms in jail during India's own struggle for independence. Reading him I became aware of India as a real, modern country—as opposed to a mythical one—a recent phenomenon, having achieved its independence a decade and a half before East Africa did, after a long struggle. I was reading, for the first time after a colonial education, words written by an Indian, and I felt a swell of pride in that. After Nehru I read Gandhi, in English at first, then later, falteringly, in what seemed a difficult Gujarati. (I grew up speaking this language, in addition to Kutchi, a more regional language, a smattering of Hindi, and of course Swahili.) Gandhi brought India even closer: he had lived many years in South Africa, and he had given an opinion regarding the so-called Indian Question in East Africa; and he was a Gujarati, from the same city, as I was to discover, as my maternal grandfather.

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In the early 1970s, a time still of the hippies and the counter-culture and the antiwar movement, India had a certain *outré* glamour for young people, denoting spirituality, austerity, and a Lucy-in-the-sky exoticism. The Beatles had visited India, all manner of gurus did their rounds of North America, books on spiritualism flourished. Louis Malle's dense personal documentary *Phantom India* evoked the exotic and the mysterious at a time when the material and the rational, as symbols of weapons and war, were under attack by the young. To think that my roots were there, amidst all that magic of India. A Satyajit Ray retrospective, showing all his films in a college hall, was another revelation. In Ray's sparsely drawn India, full of pithy reality, the characters reached out to me in all my Indian-ness. I did not have to speak Bengali to understand them. I could catch the fleeting shadow of sadness as

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it crossed the face of a mother, laugh at the banter of city youths out on a picnic, exult in the catchy, triumphant smile of a young father carrying his son on his shoulders.

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— I had long harboured a desire to visit India, ever since this youthful romance, but more immediate and mundane and adult concerns soon took the greater priority. The possibility receded in some back drawer of the mind, an experience put off indefinitely; its time would come. It did, two decades later, when through a fortuitous contact I published a novel in India. Finally, I told myself, I had made that visit, albeit symbolically. Soon after, as a corollary, came an invitation to go to India for a conference. Arrangements would be made for me to tour various places; just come, said my hosts. The current outbreak of riots in the country was of no concern, I was assured, they would not affect me. Yes, I replied promptly, in case they changed their minds, I will come to India. The significance of the journey that awaited seemed as profound as possible for a single human life.

And so to that first arrival. It was 3 a.m. in New Delhi's airport; if I had not actually rehearsed this moment, I had thought of it many times. A return after three generations, if one wanted to lend it epic proportions, an element of drama. I recall African Americans arriving in Nairobi or Dar es Salaam in the sixties, a decade of intense black pride and consciousness, and kissing the sun-drenched earth of their forefathers. I was not of so dramatic an inclination, and my people had not been away as long as theirs had. And besides, I stepped out not onto the earth of India but upon the rubber mat of a covered portal and found myself walking through musty corridors into a dingy immigration hall, where I was hit by an overwhelmingly wretched sense of the familiar. Long lines, people jumping queues, patient, bemused officials. A tired and valiantly grinning host met me finally and took me to a hostel through dark Delhi streets; shown my room, I fell straight asleep.

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Down Ancestral Roads, Gujarat: Fearfully

Small of body, big of mind . . .
the lover is a Gujarati

AVINASH VYAS, song

I see phantoms of hatred and of the heart's fullness and of
the coming emptiness

W. B. YEATS, "Meditations in Time of Civil War"

This is completely
biased word fueled
with hatred for Hindus

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origins in the Lohana and Bhatia castes of western Gujarat and Kutch. The first names used by our people right up to my grandfathers' generation were purely Indian, in contrast to the Persian- and Arabic-origin names of typical Muslims, and indeed shared with Hindu communities. Older people among the Hindu Lohanas and even among the Khojas know of the ancestral unity of the two groups. According to the stories told by the Lohanas, their ancestors come from a Kshatriya group who had lived in the north, in the areas occupied by modern Afghanistan and northern Pakistan, and had migrated to the south in the eleventh or twelfth centuries during the period of massive unrest there. Mythologically, the Lohanas, like other Indian groups, trace their ancestry to a personality from the epics, in their case to Rama through his son Luv.

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The history of the Khojas, except for this connection, is murky, much of it myth and legend. There were no written records until recent times; the earliest handwritten ginan manuscript dates only to the eighteenth century and is of the canonical "Das Avatar." There has been all the room, therefore, for manoeuvring a history and identity for modern times: forgetting, eliding, rewriting.



A different process of revisionism is very much in evidence when I visit the shrine of Imamshah, a grandson of Sadardeen, in central Gujarat some ten miles out of Ahmedabad. The context is very much political, in the climate of the day. The BJP is in power in Delhi and, at least according to that party's politicians and their euphoric pre-election slogans, India is shining.

Down a paved though narrow and rough road off the Baroda-Ahmedabad highway, after a couple of factories, past extensive wheat fields, comes the village of Giramtha. It is, essentially, about a quarter-mile of road; a sign outside the village put up by the

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communalist VHP welcomes you if you are a Hindu. Beyond that we see a clock tower, yellow in colour, and soon we have arrived at an elaborate, massive gate, flanked on either side by a life-sized stone statue of a guard wearing a traditional uniform standing beside a lion. This is Pirana, the shrine to Imamshah, grandson of Sadardeen. I was here nine years before but cannot recall the site being so heavily built up. Past the gate, we walk into an unpaved parking area of sorts, though there are no vehicles around, and thence enter the compound of a two-storey hostel-like building. A fair number of people are going in and out. A woman usher in white sari greets us and directs us down a corridor, at the end of which is a heap of removed footwear. We enter a paved compound containing a number of graves of various sizes, some of them large and prominent, in front of a square white building with a dome, which is the mausoleum of Imamshah. The place is active with worshippers, the atmosphere calm, almost torpid; a group of Muslim men, kerchiefs over their heads, stands around one of the larger graves, placing the traditional offering of a chaddar, a coloured cotton sheet, and flowers over it; then, palms open in front of them in the conventional gesture, they whisper their prayers, in Arabic, I presume.

The mausoleum has the structure of any number of dargahs, burial places of Muslim holy men. A few steps lead up to the verandah, which goes all around an inner chamber containing the grave. As in all dargahs, women cannot go inside. On the floor at the top of the steps, on either side of the doorway leading inside, sit two functionaries in white overshirts and trousers, white pandit caps on the head, and before them come to sit the supplicants. I walk past them through to the inner room, removing my socks (my shoes already removed), and come upon three graves overhung with intricately carved and painted canopies supported on silvered wooden posts. An odour of incense and perfume hangs in the air. Behind the graves, in the centre, burns an old wick lamp. Imamshah's

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grave is the middle one, on his left is that of one of his sons, and to his right that of his wife. All three graves are heaped with flowers and chaddars, and at the heads of the two men's graves have been placed crowns wrought of a dark metal, most likely silver.

What do I feel here, at this shrine of a holy man, a pir, whose ginans I can quote? Whose wanderings I had only imagined before, with all the distant reality of the comic book "classics" of a child? At any dargah, a shrine of this kind, and even at a temple before a priest, I cannot help but allow in me a solemn feeling, some respect and humility, for I stand alongside others in a symbolic place that in some manner reflects human existence and frailty, our smallness and exaltedness, and our striving for understanding. I cannot beg for a favour, as others do, as I might have done in another life that is long gone. Here stands a rational, a rationalized being who is acquainted with spiritual longing but cannot yield to it.

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But this place is particularly special, because it connects me historically; I stand before a physical memento, a memorial over the buried remains of a personality who influenced and preserved the lives of my ancestors for generations in this part of the world. In some strange manner I feel I have a claim to the place that I have not felt elsewhere. My bearing, the quick confidence in my step, says so, and I am surprised at myself.

I come out and ask one of the two functionaries at the steps if they could tell me about Imamshah. Certainly, he says, call your friends. Like the other one, he is clean-shaven and fair. He looks a little uncomfortable. I sit down cross-legged on the floor before him, and my friends—who don't know this tradition and are somewhat hesitant—join us and do likewise, but we have to wait for the second functionary to finish hearing out the petition of a Sikh boy, who looks about sixteen and has come with his mother (a Hindu, we learn, though get no explanation). The functionary, as if to make sure the pir in his burial chamber is paying heed to the

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full details of the boy's pleas, leans forward and turns his head searchingly towards the open doorway and even occasionally repeats after the boy: "... help me get to Australia ... Imamshah Bawa, help me with my studies ... help me find a good job ... and I will give you half of my first month's salary." The boy's mother places a thick wad of hundred-rupee notes in the functionary's hand, then mother and son get up.

The functionaries now explain to us that Imamshah was born in Uch, Multan (now in Pakistani Punjab), his sons were so-and-so, etcetera. He narrates a miracle by which the lamp that burns inside the mausoleum was lit. When Imamshah was ready to depart the world, he sat on his seat, still preserved at this site, and instructed his followers to place a lamp some distance away. As he breathed his last, the lamp lighted up. It has continued to burn since then without input of any oil. I ask about Imamshah's ancestry. They say, somewhat uncomfortably, that it is not known and give me two pamphlets.

A woman comes and supplicates on behalf of her son-in-law; they tell her, rather brusquely, that he has to come himself, and can he afford to pay?

Bedi

In the distance, the Sikh boy has put on a pair of anklets so that his legs are cuffed to each other. The functionaries explain to me that if the anklets on the boy come apart as he hobbles forward, his wishes will be fulfilled. The sooner his legs are released the sooner the fulfillment. As it happens, the anklets come apart in two or three hobbles. The boy is lucky, he should get to Australia soon.

This blatant monetary theme is unsettling. To my understanding, the message of the pirs is spiritual. It is about the soul's release from the bonds of the material world. I do not recall functionaries being present the previous time I was here, nor do I remember crowds this large. There are Om signs painted in various places, but then there are the Muslims who come to pray, and the graves with Arabic script on them. There is a policeman on the premises.

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The woman with the Sikh boy tells me that she and her husband are Hindus and come once every few months to the shrine because they believe in Imamshah; the boy says fervently that he will continue to come even if his wishes are not fulfilled, because he finds something inspiring here. We do not ask why the parents of a Sikh boy are Hindu. Whatever else may be going on here, this liberality of attitude, this spiritual laissez-faire is one of the joyful aspects of India that one hopes will prevail over the rabid antics and murderous forays of the fanatics who seek purity.

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I ask one of the ushers if I may see the Kaka, the head of the shrine, half expecting the request to be denied. To my surprise I am told to climb some stairs to where the Kaka is sitting. Perhaps my garb—walking shoes, short-sleeved shirt, khakis—and manner have given me away as someone from abroad, a potential donor of dollars.

The Kaka sits with a few men at the far end of a long anteroom upstairs, a row of high-backed red-upholstered chairs on either side of him. He wears a white robe, with a saffron sash around his neck, his head is bare, his hair sparse; he is fair in colouring, has baggy eyes and seems to be in his sixties. There is a benign look to him. His name is Nanji Bhai, or Nanakdas. He had been preceded by Karsandas. There are framed photos of the previous Kakas on the walls.

I go forward hesitantly and greet the Kaka the way one would a Khoja mukhi, a headman, in our khano, with a pranam and a shake of the hands. He gives me a blessing. He tells someone to show me the kursi, the “seat,” inside. I am taken by the attendant to an adjoining room and shown a seat consisting of an embroidered white silk cushion, which will be the throne of the tenth avatar of Vishnu, called the Nishkalanki (“spotless”) avatar when he comes. Beside it is a seat of worked metal, perhaps silver, given to the Kaka upon his recognition as a mahant, a major guru, at a great meeting of Hindu priests.

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I nod appreciatively at these exhibits, don't quite grasp when the grand meeting of gurus took place, and return to the front room and sit down with the Kaka. One of his companions, dressed all in white with close-cropped hair, does most of the talking.

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He says this Imamshah centre serves numerous communities without discrimination. There are centres worldwide and more than a million followers. People come with their problems or wishes, concerning a business venture, for example, or standing for election for the BJP. Imamshah was born in Uch, Multan, of Brahmin parents; they died when he was young and he was brought up by neighbours, a Muslim family, descendants of the Prophet. In the space of a week, before he was ten, he had learned the Vedas, the Upanishads, the shastras; he performed miracles—made the blind see, the sick well, and so on—and was recognized as a great soul.

→ The man says he is from the United States, sometimes comes to Toronto. My companions ask to film the scene and are granted permission. The Kaka for the occasion calls for his turban and puts it on, then speaks to the camera.

Before we leave, I cannot resist telling the Kaka that I am a Khoja. Yes, he says, Khojas do come here.

Could I be mistaken in thinking what I saw here some nine years ago was a much older-looking place? There had been only a minor attendant then, who had shown me a board on which the genealogy of the pir had been written down, including the name of his father (Hassan Kabirdeen) and grandfather (Sadardeen), so well known to me. The ginans of both of them were on my tongue, having been heard daily and drummed further into our heads by a certain Karim Master, who made us recite them in religion class at school. Hasan Kabirdeen sang the most beautiful, plangent devotional verses in the persona of a woman, and Sadardeen, besides the mystical verses also left behind cosmological and theological verses, one of them a life of the Buddha. Imamshah had

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Lies. Cooked-up stories to show Imamshah as Hindu. This is Taqiyya in Practice

This person is Premdas Bapu later renamed as Premswarupdas



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performed a miracle at this site and converted some pilgrims of the Lohana caste to his teachings. Closing their eyes and without moving, they had completed their pilgrimage to Kashi (Benares).

It seems that a complete usurpation has been made, a clean takeover, with a new origin and new stories, new rites, new look, a lot of money, all to convert it into a Hindu site. Back on the main floor there is a ritual room, empty but for some paraphernalia to one side. On the walls are newly painted pictorial depictions of the life of Imamshah that we just heard.

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This is still not a Hindu site, not that it matters what you call it. The tradition has been syncretistic, anyway, and to some degree it still is. One wonders what changes await. The Arabic inscriptions in places, the graves themselves, depicting Muslim burials, must be disconcerting to some.

On the way out, I buy a few mementos at a gift shop: three cassettes of ginans (CDs are out of stock), a book of ginans, and a small photo of the Kaka mounted inside a clear plastic stand. I also pick up a pamphlet, which reproduces a painting of Imamshah. He is depicted sitting on a cushion on a tiled floor, wearing white pyjamas and tunic, over which is an open white jacket with gold piping; he has a white and gold turban on his head, a black beard, and a tilak on his forehead. His right hand is raised in a blessing, the palm facing outwards, the fingers tight. The caption underneath says, "Sadguru Shri Imamshah Maharaj." The term "pir" is not used, but the biography inside refers to him as a Sufi saint who was born in 1440.

The police on the premises are an indication that a conflict is in progress. Next door to this shrine, beyond a barbed wire fence, we see an old mosque. The fence must have a tale to tell. We resolve to visit the other side. The only way is to go outside and around.



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It is not easy to find the entrance. People stare at us, give vague answers to our queries; evidently there is much animosity around. One person points to a door that is very obviously closed permanently and says that's it. As we walk on, we realize to our surprise that a man is following us on a motorbike. We persist, walking up the road in a dilapidated section of the town, then turning to the right, until we finally arrive at a gate in a wall, with a sign. We enter through the gate and immediately a man appears dressed in ordinary shirt and pants. He says he is a sayyid, Imamshah's progeny and descendant of the Prophet. This place looks familiar to me, it was a part of Pirana when I last came here. The mosque is old but seems well tended, with a large open shed next to it. The man speaks slowly and gives me the genealogy of Imamshah I am familiar with, at least up to a few generations back. He says he had seen us on the other side; he himself goes there every day to pay respects to the grave of the pir and other holy men. He invites us to his home, a well-built though modest single-storey house, with a small living room in front where we sit on low sofas. We have water, then tea, we use his washroom. I ask him about the etched slab of wood or stone I had seen before, on which Imamshah's lineage had been inscribed. He tells me that it and several other items had been removed or destroyed. Literature as well. I am not oblivious to the fact that he has his own interests to promote, yet there seems to be some truth to what he says.

He brings out a chart that traces his family back to Muhammad and includes, of course, Sadardeen, Hassan Kabirdeen, and Imamshah.

He has sued the Kaka's group and the case is in court. But he does not expect an early resolution. I ask him about other Imamshah descendants, surely they must be around? He is vague about them—there are many, he says. His brother lives next door. His son is a manager of a communications company in Ahmedabad. And he confirms the story that one of Imamshah's progeny married a daughter of Sultan Mahmud Begada.

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The next day, standing outside the Imamshah centre, observing. It is Thursday, one of the "big" days. A woman with her family walks in, the mother carrying a baby completely draped in gunny cloth. A grimness to her look. People bring their problems here, their dearest wishes. How close was my own upbringing to worshippers of this kind: my mother asked to be blessed so she could have children, was given an apple to eat, and conceived; my unmarried aunt would stand on one foot daily, praying fervently, and finally got married, but the man turned out to be a drunkard. I, too, was taught to pray for benefits. No longer do I hold such belief, though I cannot help but empathize with those who arrive here, so openly bearing their desperation.

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An SUV passes by us slowly, inside is the Kaka's companion from the United States who gave us the story of Imamshah's Brahmin origins. He waves briefly and formally from the air-conditioned interior. He must know by now that we have been to see the Muslim contender next door and are, at best, curious busybodies.

There is a certain naïveté about this renovated shrine and its refurbished story, a certain hubris, perhaps due to the nationalist rise in the country; there are BJP posters around the village. The fact that the heirs to a syncretistic, mystical tradition uniting Hindu and Muslim elements would seek comfort from such politics is perturbing. Surely past visitors have written about Pirana and recorded the previous character of the shrine?

And so while my people, the Khojas, have been cleansing their heritage of Indian, so-called Hindu, elements, here at Pirana essentially the same heritage is in the process of being cleansed of its Islamic connections and history. But such cleansings cannot be complete, there is always evidence left behind, questions that remain.

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One thorn in the flesh for the Pirana site is the mosque next door and the Muslim claim to the identity and heritage of Imamshah. We soon discover another.

304 As we prepare to depart from this town, someone asks us if we know about a stone that moves when you make a wish. This sounds intriguing in the extreme, and in spite of time constraints we decide to go and have a look.

Behold, then, a new spiritual wonderland.

We walk into an unpaved alley leading from the main road into what looks like a separate community: women at the doorways of their shacks, seated on the ground, working at some kitchen task, children playing about. We reach a gate with a sign announcing the Bakarshah Bawa Mandir—a temple, as the name indicates, to a Muslim saint. The people who worship here are another distinct Imamshah group. A modest but more spacious, open site; no new constructions here, no gift shop selling religious memorabilia. There are rooms at the sides along a wall for pilgrims to sleep in. The compound is paved, and roughly in the centre of it is an oblong-shaped black stone on the ground, about a foot long, some five hundred years old, we are told. A priest sits next to the stone, and a few other men are also about. The ritual is that you make a wish, then crouch upon the stone; if it turns, taking you with it, the wish will be fulfilled. A young man's wish has just been promised fulfillment as we arrive, and he gleefully gets up. One of my companions takes his turn; the stone turns for him, too.

I enter the main building, which houses the graves. Next to the entrance, on a board mounted on the wall, is a rather colourful and elaborate chart written in Gujarati. It lists the avatars of Vishnu, starting with the fish, but there are eleven of them here instead of the usual ten. The tenth avatar, according to this list, is "Muhammad dur rasoolilah," the Islamic prophet. The eleventh avatar is named as Nishkalanki, the Pure One, who was number

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ten for the other Imamshah group, as he has been for the Khojas. According to the story told here, he had been born but then disappeared. He is Bakarshah Bawa, the thirteenth descendant of Imamshah, and he died at the age of one. His body is believed to have turned into flowers, and he is the avatar to come.

There is a small child's grave, belonging to Bakarshah Bawa, to one side.

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This is a complete fusion of Hindu and Muslim beliefs. Moreover, it identifies the Muslim origins of Imamshah, which is the genealogy as I learned it, contradicting the one described at the big shrine across the road. How will these two shrines continue to coexist side by side in the future?

In a small room at the far end of the grounds, facing the main building, is a gallery of painted illustrations. Here are bright paintings of the Prophet Muhammad, their creator oblivious to injunctions in the Islamic world; the Imam Ali; Fatima, his wife, daughter of the Prophet; the grandsons Hassan and Hussein. There are also portraits of Bakarshah and of a few other Bawas and their wives who, I am told, look like beautiful Brahmin ladies.

And so, a simple, modest place—no sophistication, no special garb, nothing fancy. A forty-rupee contribution is considered generous. The jemadar, caretaker, who is not a priest, is a volunteer, a retired railway civil servant. He comes six days a week, has a very simple room on the premises, with hardly anything but a rolled mattress and some personal items. He takes Sundays off.



5:25 a.m., in my hotel room in Ahmedabad.

I wake up to an azaan from a mosque, a beautiful clear sound, high and always rising . . .

And then, a little later, the silence is broken again, this time by a sound that couldn't be more different: a bhajan from a nearby

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white. He comes out with twinkling eyes and smiling. Greeting us, he says he's been saying the namaz, the Muslim prayer. He is a follower of Imamshah. He takes us inside to his room. What I see there stuns me.

Two years ago, the door had been similarly closed, and just as today, the man had come out and bade me come in. There was at that time in this room a small personal shrine to Imamshah in the corner just behind the door, consisting of a picture of the Imamshah shrine in Pirana, a lamp, an Imamshah symbol—the open palm—and other items. It was decorated with a series of multi-coloured festival lights. The man told me he had two names, Mohan and Akbar, that he was a Thakur by caste and a Parmar, descended from the kings of Gujarat. The room was quite dark and dingy, as it is now.

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It was uncanny, this experience. Imamshah was hardly a major character known to all, like Kabir, Mira Bai, and Sufis like Nizamuddin of Delhi. I had no doubt that, were I to inquire, there would not be a soul walking outside on the road who would know the name. What was the probability that in this great bustling city, of all the roadside shrines here, I would walk into one I could directly relate to? Was this man a Hindu or a Muslim? He did not have to be exclusively one or the other, as his two names vouched, and according to the original Imamshah tradition. But for me, here was an example of how a holy man of the past could be reinvented and assimilated, how a tradition could be modified into a personal faith in total disregard to the orthodoxies that dictated to and bullied the masses. How contradictory and mysterious India could be.

And now, with Mahesh beside me? The shrine I had seen then is still here, but on the ground before it is something new: a small— a mini—grave covered with a green chaddar. On top of it are small stuffed animals looking like donkeys or horses.

Akbar-Mohan now says his two names are Akbar and Madhav—the latter of course is a form of Mohan, both are names of Krishna.

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He tells us that he visits the Rani Sipri mosque to pray and he has a guru in Pirana who is a sayyid, a descendant of the Prophet. So is the man a Muslim now? Worshipping stuffed animals is as un-Islamic as you can be. And there are the two names. Is it a coincidence that Akbar is also the name of the Mughal emperor who conceived of a universal Indian religion? But scruffy-looking Akbar-Mohan-Madhav does not seem to be a man of lofty or regal thoughts.

We sit outside on the verandah, where Akbar-Mohan-Madhav offers us tea, which we are served in saucers. People come to his shrine, he informs us, bringing physical and mental ailments, and through “his” (I presume Imamshah’s) mercy they get cured. A grandson lies quietly beside us on a traditional baby hammock, a ghodio. Akbar-Mohan-Madhav has two sons, who have decent jobs, he says. When he wanted his daughter to get married—he does not say when—money for expenses had appeared for him through “his” miracle.

And so this little branch shrine too has a commercial angle it did not have the previous time. And there’s yet another angle.

The pol is entirely Hindu. This bit of information Mahesh, always the political animal, extracts from the man. No sane Muslim would live in an exclusively Hindu area in today’s Ahmedabad. But this follower of Imamshah admits that the two domes could have had graves in them; one of them, the tire store, could well have been a mausoleum. In fact, he goes on, the area had been a Muslim graveyard before.

How did an ancient Muslim graveyard with a mausoleum turn into a Hindu residential area? The pol has a name, an attribute of Krishna that I will not reveal, written—as Mahesh shows me as we come back into the street—on a BJP poster, with the names of its patrons, well-known right-wing politicians, prominently upon it.

With politics part of the picture, this little shrine makes no coherent sense. The idea of a down-and-out Ahmedabadi inspired

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munalism, and colonialism, the devastation of Mahmud is surely undeniable. What evokes wonder is how potent its memory is kept today. And not only by the Hindu nationalists: the Pakistan army has named its short-range ballistic missile "Ghaznavi"; that is, Mahmud of Ghazna.

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Shortly before Junagadh, there comes a side road leading into a town called Paneli. Small and neat, Paneli is the ancestral home of Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the founding father of Pakistan. The birthplace of that other great leader, Mohandas Gandhi, who was so much against the Partition, is less than a hundred miles away. I know that Jinnah was a Khoja, though not a practising one. I can see a Khoja calling for Hindu-Muslim unity, as Jinnah earlier did—he had been one of the party who welcomed Gandhi back from South Africa in 1915—but how a Khoja could lead a bitter campaign for a Muslim homeland has always mystified me. What he really desired, however, and what he believed, are matters of intense controversy. Speaking to Pakistan's constituent assembly in August 1947, he said, "You are free; you are free to go to your temples, you are free to go to your mosques, or to any other place of worship in this State of Pakistan. . . . You may belong to any religion or caste or creed—that has nothing to do with the business of the State." This statement hardly describes an Islamic nation. He died an enigma, in 1948, barely a year after Independence. His wife, a Parsi, and his daughter, their only child, did not accompany him to the new state.

Jinnah's father's name was Jinnahbhai Punja Meghji (or Meghani), a typical Khoja Kathiawari name (*megha* means "cloud" in Sanskrit). Of Jinnah's Khoja background, his biographer Stanley Wolpert says, "Khojas fled Persian persecution to Western India, among other regions, between the tenth and sixteenth centuries."

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There is no evidence of any sort whatsoever, in fact, of Khojas having fled from anywhere to India; it is well known in Gujarat that they are from the Lohana and Bhatia castes. This is what the Lohanas say; it is what other Jinnah historians say; it is what is told at Pirana to this day; and in my childhood, full of Khoja legends, I never heard of an Iranian origin. It is remarkable how a prominent historian could accept without question such a cock-and-bull story, evidently invented in Pakistan to give the country's "Great Leader" a more prestigious—that is, Persian and Arabic—Islamic heritage. Wolpert also seems to have been told that "Mamad" was Jinnah's pet name at home, when in fact it is how all Khojas, by the very nature of their language, pronounce "Muhammad."

Our mistake upon entering the town of Paneli, of such historical connections, is to stop and openly inquire of some people standing around a tree where Jinnah's family house is. From the responses we receive, it seems it might be right across from where we have stopped. But while we are still conversing, and just as a finger points us to a building, a policeman comes by on a motorbike. What Jinnah? he shouts angrily. There is no Jinnah here! If his house were here, we would have burnt it! Go! And he escorts us on his bike right out of Paneli like a small-town sheriff in a movie. Knowing the level of corruption of the police, this is Gujarat after all, we believe we have had a narrow escape. We also surmise that others must have come around over the years to look for Jinnah's ancestral home. This Gujarati Gillespie takes us right back to the highway before turning around.

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